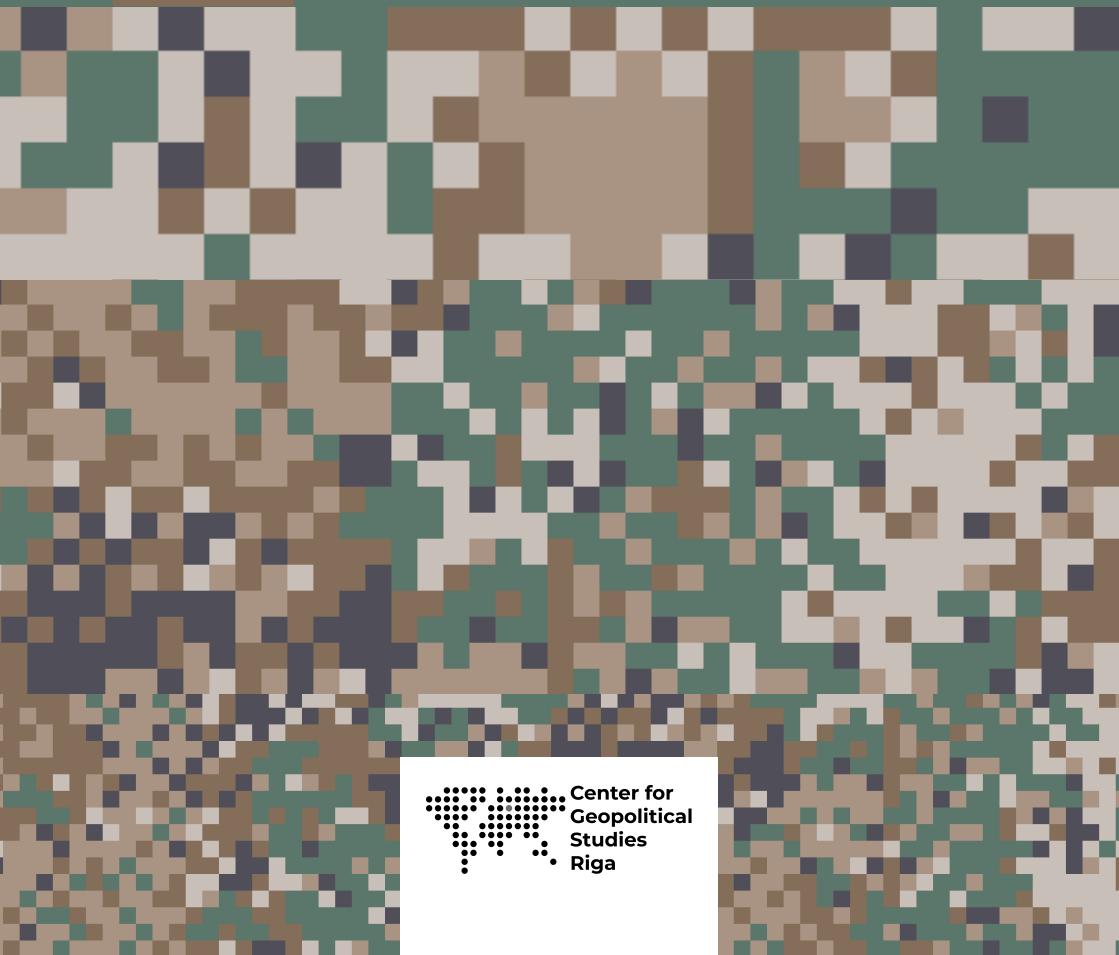
Māris Andžāns and Jānis Kažociņš

Three Decades of Baltic Military Cooperation and the Way Ahead



Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga

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Three Decades of Baltic Military Cooperation and the Way Ahead

This report examines thirty years of military cooperation between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Baltic military cooperation played a significant role in preparing the Baltic States for NATO. However, it would not have been successful without the support of many Western partners. These partners are now NATO Allies and the relationships with them have changed. This report highlights upcoming challenges and suggests a path forward for Baltic cooperation in the new and evolving security environment.

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Introduction

Baltic trilateral military cooperation is noteworthy both within NATO and on a global scale. Unlike many advanced bilateral partnerships and multilateral alliances, this case is unique. Since the early 1990s, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have actively pursued deep trilateral military integration. Their cooperative initiatives include the Baltic Battalion (BALTBAT), the Baltic Naval Squadron (BALTRON), the Baltic Air Surveillance Network (BALTNET) and the Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL).

In addition to these trilateral projects and smaller initiatives, defence ministers, military commanders, and other officials from the Baltic States convene annually or more frequently to align their policies. As a result, the Baltic States have been united on almost all significant strategic defence matters over the past thirty years.

Despite these achievements, certain expectations remain unmet. Each country has developed its own military culture, acquired different military equipment, and created additional regional military integration formats, such as Estonia's partnership with Finland and Lithuania's with Poland. Among the BALT projects, only BALTDEFCOL has continued and remained fully trilateral.

There is a wealth of literature regarding Baltic trilateral cooperation from the mid-1990s until the Baltic States joined NATO.

These include writings by Dalbiņš,[1] Kažociņš,[2] Sapronas,[3] Austin,[4] Alsauskas,[5] Møller,[6] Bergman,[7] Vaiksnoras,[8] Raunio,[9] Brett[10] and others.

Multiple analyses reevaluated Baltic military collaboration during the initial decade of their NATO membership. These include writings by Kolga,[11] Jermalavičius,[12] and an extensive anthology edited by Lawrence and Jermalavičius[13] with chapters by Männik,[14] Paulauskas,[15] Mölder,[16] Ito,[17] and others. That is probably the most multifaceted analysis of Baltic defence cooperation.

Over the past decade, the literature on Baltic military cooperation has further expanded. Ito wrote his 2015 doctoral dissertation on the Baltic military cooperative projects,[18] which is probably the most in-depth academic study on Baltic trilateral defence engagement. Other written contributions on Baltic military cooperation include those by Dilāns,[19] Vanaga,[20] Romanovs and Andžāns,[21] Jermalavičius and Marmei,[22] Atmante, Kaljurand and Jermalavičius,[23] Nikers and Tabuns,[24] Jermalavičius, Lawrence and Merilind,[25] and Česnakas.[26]

Various other authors have explored Baltic trilateral military cooperation within broader research and covered specific aspects of Baltic States' military engagement. Yet, to our knowledge, no studies have addressed this matter in light of the situation after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

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From Past to Present

The Historical Context of Baltic Military Trilateral Cooperation

The Baltic States' inability to form a robust trilateral military alliance during the interwar period is often highlighted as a lesson not to be repeated. However, contemporary (non-historian) discussions about Baltic military cooperation do not adequately address the period's successful episodes and the harsh geopolitical realities.

What is noteworthy about this period is that achieving de facto independence would have been much more problematic without regional cooperation during the Baltic Wars of Independence. In particular Estonian troops, alongside Latvians, played a significant role in liberating northern Latvia from German occupying forces. Later, with the assistance of Polish troops, southeast Latvia and the city of Daugavpils were liberated from the Red Army. However, the assistance Latvia received was no charity but pure pragmatism, especially for Estonia which saw the German forces as an existential threat to its independence.

As Estonia and Latvia signed peace treaties with Soviet Russia in 1920, their borders were mainly set. However, Lithuania's situation was far more complex. In 1920, Polish troops seized the

Vilnius region, while in 1923, Lithuania annexed the Klaipėda region (Memelland), then administered by France according to the Versailles Treaty. In 1939, the year before Soviet occupation, Lithuania regained the Vilnius region with Soviet "assistance" but lost the Klaipėda region following Nazi Germany's ultimatum.

Lithuania's geopolitical entanglements and its consequent balancing between the Soviet Union and Germany and against Poland was one of the main factors effectively preventing a viable trilateral Baltic military alliance. The closest it came to a regional like-minded coalition was a 1922 accord politique between Latvia, Estonia, Poland, and Finland, which the latter did not ratify. Nevertheless, in 1923, Estonia and Latvia signed a bilateral defence agreement, which included a provision of mutual military assistance. In 1934, the alliance was broadened to Lithuania as the three signed the Treaty of Understanding and Cooperation. Although this cooperation format helped align political cooperation to a certain extent, it did not amount to notable practical military collaboration. Eventually, all three were occupied by the Soviet Union in June 1940, despite their declarations of neutrality.

When the three Baltic States regained their independence in 1991, they had endured more than five decades of Soviet occupation, punctuated by a brief Nazi occupation during the Second World War before the Soviets returned. Due to their geography and similar historical paths, the three Baltic States were natural partners. They were of comparable size and social, political, and economic development, locked in similar geostrategic positions, and shared Westernization aspirations.

Estonia had linguistic affinities to Finland, and Lithuania had a long-shared historical path with Poland. These two partner countries later significantly impacted their neighbours, including their defence sectors, though at least initially they could not substitute trilateral Baltic cooperation. Finland was non-aligned and only gradually abolished its "Finlandization" policy, which guided its relations with the Soviet Union. It was also economically

far more developed than Estonia. Meanwhile, Poland was much bigger than Lithuania and had other regional priorities. In other words, Finland and Poland were in different categories from the Baltic States.

Against this background, Baltic trilateral cooperation gradually assumed various forms. Building on foundations laid by the intense cooperation during the period of Baltic national awakening at the end of the 1980s, the Baltic Assembly was established in 1991, and the Baltic Council of Ministers formed in 1994. The former institutionalised regular cooperation among the parliamentarians of the three states, while the latter – among the governments. Since the beginning, these institutions have played their role in keeping trilateral defence cooperation on the agenda and maintaining pressure on the defence sectors.

As the Baltic States had no reason or desire to consider themselves successors to the Soviet Union and its armed forces, the forces of all three countries had to be created from scratch. This was a significant difference from other countries that gained or regained independence from the Soviet Union or were so-called satellite states during the Cold War. In contrast to, say, Belarus or Ukraine, the Baltic States inherited virtually no Soviet military equipment.

Moreover, the extent of needless destruction of military infrastructure was stunning. Huge amounts of time and energy had been devoted to ensure that the Baltic States could not use much of the military infrastructure remaining on their soil after Russia's troops departed. Some examples include the scuttled submarines polluting the sea in Latvia's port of Liepāja and Estonia's Paldiski. In Paldiski and elsewhere, the wanton destruction of barracks was shocking. In the Lielvārde military airfield underground communication and other cables had been ripped out to make the airfield unusable.[27] Nevertheless, former Soviet bases were later used for the Baltic national armed forces, and former Baltic officers of the Soviet army served in the new armed forces.

There were many complications in creating armed forces basically from zero. Among them were limited experience, lack of resources, and the cautiousness of Western countries in providing military assistance or training while Russia's, formerly Soviet, armed forces were still stationed in all three Baltic States. Reluctantly and following significant Western engagement, Russia's armed forces left Lithuania in 1993, and Latvia and Estonia the following year, though Russia's forces continued operating the Skrunda electronic surveillance station in Latvia until 1998 because this had a strategic importance for Russia and took time to replace.

The Outset of Baltic Military Cooperation and BALTBAT

Even before formal international recognition of the Baltic States' renewed independence, the defence ministers signed a protocol regarding cooperation in June 1991. Trilateral collaboration gained momentum in 1993. During a November meeting of the Baltic armed forces commanders, they decided to conduct regular commanders' meetings henceforth and to form a joint battalion-level unit.

An informal meeting of interested parties to discuss this development occurred in Stockholm, Sweden, in December 1993. During this meeting, it became clear that the United Kingdom was prepared to lead or substantially support the project. However, it was also evident that a Nordic lead would be less potentially provocative to Russia.[28]

While the Baltic States aimed to establish self-defence capabilities, BALTBAT prioritised peacekeeping. It seemed awkward to some. However, this decision was essentially pragmatic. There were worries about Russia's potential response to the Baltic States developing their defence forces, especially with Western military support. At that time Western nations were working to foster cooperative ties with Russia and trying to avoid irritating it.

The peacekeeping model was deemed non-provocative to Russia, allowing Western nations to provide military support to the Baltic states more easily. According to Dilāns, this model was regarded as "inconspicuous and politically acceptable" for Russia.[29] Moreover, Russia found it easier to accept the Nordic countries taking the lead than if, for example, the United States or the United Kingdom had taken the lead role. Ultimately, Russia refrained from interference with BALTBAT, allowing the Baltic States to pursue this and other joint military projects.

In June 1994, defence ministers from the Baltic and Nordic countries convened in Visby, Sweden, to sign a memorandum establishing a Baltic peacekeeping battalion. Denmark took on the project's lead role, heading both the steering and military working groups. The Steering Group was run by a Danish diplomat, Per Carlsen,[30] who from the beginning was instrumental in making the project a success.

BALTBAT was inaugurated in February 1995 at a ceremony at Camp Ādaži in Latvia, with the Presidents of all three countries present. Originally, BALTBAT's goal was to prepare a combined Baltic infantry unit for international peacekeeping missions, enhance regional security, and improve operational cooperation among the Baltic armed forces by integrating Western practices. In 1998, as NATO's post-Cold War role changed, its objectives shifted to building light motorised infantry capabilities for peace support operations. Greater emphasis was placed on training staff officers at various levels and developing a joint Baltic military doctrine,[31] an aspiration which has yet to be realised.

BALTBAT consisted of three individual national companies alongside a trinational headquarters and support functions. Throughout its eight years, BALTBAT, as an entire battalion, was not deployed for any operations. However, approximately 1,200 BALTBAT soldiers were deployed[32] in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Lebanon. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, they were integrated into a Danish contingent within NATO's IFOR and SFOR

missions. In Lebanon, they were part of a Norwegian battalion in the UNIFIL mission.

The number of Western countries supporting BALTBAT to a greater or lesser extent was substantial. This included training, mentoring and transfer of equipment. Though Denmark was the lead nation, the United Kingdom's Royal Marines (later reinforced by members of the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps) conducted the initial training. This choice was based on three factors. Firstly, the Corps of Royal Marines was of equivalent size to the armed forces of each Baltic State, so they could easily relate to each other. Secondly, the Royal Marines were a lightly equipped force without heavy weapons and armoured vehicles, just like the Baltic forces. And thirdly, as commando forces, they were an elite with a value beyond their size. This latter factor was very important for the Baltic States as they sought to construct self-defence forces from scratch.

Reasons for refraining from deploying the entire battalion included insufficient funding to sustain operations for at least six months and BALTBAT's lack of readiness and capability to operate independently from other partners. The inability of the Baltic States to provide even a second rotational battalion was also a handicap. Dilāns contends that, if there had been the political will, the battalion could have been deployed as a complete unit.[33]

BALTBAT was officially disbanded in September 2003. Battalion soldiers were reassigned to various units within their respective national armed forces. Here, their influence and Western military orientation were felt, and their assigned units were improved. It is worth noting that the United States viewed the BALTBAT project as such a success that the idea of a similar, multi-national military cooperation project in Central Asia was investigated. However, the conditions there were much less favourable for Western involvement, and the project was dropped.[34]

It is widely believed that one of the main reasons for discontinuing the project was the Baltic States' membership of NATO, an

alliance they all became part of in March 2004. This highlighted the practical approach of trilateral cooperation, utilising it as a catalyst for Westernization and joining the Alliance.

While in 1997 membership in the Alliance was, at best, a long shot, the reality of membership gave an overstated sense of security. The Baltic States were now under NATO's protective umbrella, so they felt that they no longer had to worry so much about defence and could each go their own way within the NATO framework. This was especially evident during the financial crisis of 2008 when, for instance, Latvia slashed its defence budget by almost half for the following year – from 370 to 230 million euros.[35] Article 3 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty – the duty of each member to do what it can for its own defence[36] – was forgotten in the euphoria of being protected by Article 5.[37]

Other factors leading to the dissolution of BALTBAT were the financial and human resources required to prolong the project. Dilāns believes that closing BALTBAT was hasty. He argues that the opportunity to create a joint brigade was not sufficiently investigated. Additionally, the anticipated benefits of potential practical partnerships in the region, such as the presence of Allied forces, turned out to be unrealistic.[38] Only Russia's aggression towards Ukraine in 2014 prompted NATO to think about sending rotational ground units to the Baltic States.

While much of the literature describes BALTBAT and other BALT projects as, in Ito's words, "a great success,"[39] some observers disagree. For example, Austin wrote that BALTBAT was only "of symbolic and political importance" and thus "militarily useless".[40] While not contending about the benefits of BALTBAT, Ito explained others' views that the project may have garnered excessive focus relative to other priorities, that the peacekeeping capabilities were not what the Baltic States required at that time and that the impact on the rest of the Baltic armed forces could have been broader.[41]

The points above are valid to some extent. Indeed, from a bird's-eye view, the merits of BALTBAT might have seemed

limited. However, given the task of building the armed forces from scratch and the complexity of developing and operating them, BALTBAT deserves more credit. Also, most prior writings concur that BALTBAT was a success.

Most authors admit that the Baltic battalion was crucial in Westernizing the Baltic armed forces. Dilāns referred to BALTBAT as a driver of Westernization, meticulously noting its contributions to reshaping the armed forces according to Western standards, including personnel development and education, fostering English proficiency, and establishing a Westernized internal culture.[42] Vaiksnoras argued that BALTBAT replaced "Soviet traditions with Western military culture,"[43] as BALTBAT was interconnected with the other branches of the Baltic armed forces. While the exact degree of Westernization in the armed forces can be debated, it is evident that engaging with international partners was crucial. BALTBAT thus played a significant role in cultivating a new generation of Western-oriented servicemen. Several junior officers from the Baltic battalion now hold or have held senior positions within their own armed forces.

Another important aspect is that the Baltic armed forces benefited from Western technical and financial assistance via BALTBAT, even if the aim was to prepare for peacekeeping missions. Western military support for peacekeeping purposes, particularly from Nordic countries, seemed less likely to provoke Russia. Though Western partners also provided material support that was outdated and sometimes unusable (Dilāns gave examples such as uniforms from the German Democratic Republic, munitions of the wrong calibre, and time-expired food),[44] some of the weapons and other equipment served well for many years to come.

Ultimately, BALTBAT motivated and laid the groundwork for additional Baltic trilateral initiatives, especially BALTRON, BALTNET, and BALTDEFCOL. Concurrently with the beginnings of BALTBAT, the Baltic Security Assistance Forum, or BALTSEA,

was created to formalise external defence assistance efforts from 1997 to 2005. Had the BALTBAT initial phase been less successful, it could have impacted the creation of other BALT initiatives that followed.

Though BALTBAT was dissolved over twenty years ago, its reflection has reemerged sporadically in less ambitious formats. For instance, the concept of BALTBAT reappeared as a joint Baltic effort for the NATO Response Force (NRF) in 2010 and again in 2016. Also, the idea of a more extensive joint formation, namely a Baltic brigade, has occasionally been raised. However, it has not materialised.

BALTRON

Established in 1998, BALTRON, the Baltic Naval Squadron, has attracted less public attention and fewer written assessments than BALTBAT. While Denmark managed international support for BALTBAT, Germany assumed the leading role for BALTRON.

Vaiksnoras suggests that BALTRON's establishment might be viewed "as an extension of the BALTBAT," highlighting the many similarities between the two projects. This project aimed to enhance regional security and participate in peacekeeping if needed. Both initiatives focused on developing defensive capabilities. Also, BALTRON's management structures mirrored those of BALTBAT, comprising steering and naval working groups.[45]

At present, BALTRON ensures that mine detection vessels are prepared for national missions and participate in NATO mine countermeasures operations. Additionally, it promotes collaborative response capabilities, carries out countermeasure missions, and strengthens the security of the Baltic territorial waters and economic interests. What is less frequently noted is that BALTRON is more than the vessels. It also encompasses the Navy Training Base, consisting of various smaller units in Latvia and Lithuania. In Latvia, there is the Mine Countermeasures School, the Mine

Countermeasures Equipment Workshop, the Diving School, and the Gunnery Equipment Workshop.[46]

Despite the upsides of the project, the "flagship" squadron element of BALTRON is no longer entirely trilateral since Estonia left it and subsequently joined with its vessels only on specific occasions, such as during exercises. Estonia still participates in other non-squadron elements of BALTRON. When Estonia's government approved the exit from the squadron in early 2015, it hailed BALTRON as a success, particularly concerning the Baltic path towards NATO. However, Estonia prioritised participation in the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1 (SNMCMG1) over the BALTRON.[47]

Estonia's exit from the squadron element was a blow to Baltic trilateral military cooperation. Vanaga observed that while the rationale behind Estonia's decision – resource limitations – was met with understanding, the way Estonia communicated it – implying that Latvia and Lithuania failed to invest adequately – damaged the Baltic cooperative spirit.[48] Nevertheless, the Latvian-Lithuanian core of the project has remained resolute and appears to be bound by mutual interest in the project.

Observers consider BALTRON to be a simpler project compared to BALTBAT, even with the challenges presented by complex elements like vessels and the skills required for mine detection and clearance. Vaiksnoras points out that this could be due to the fact that at the start of the project, all three navies had already commenced collaboration and were involved in international efforts. Furthermore, navies typically operate on a more international scale, and the project's stability may have been aided by a lower turnover of personnel.[49] Jermalavičius provided a comparable explanation –"[p]erhaps due to the smallness of the Baltic navies and the ability of their commanders to see things eye to eye".[50] The small size of the Baltic navies has likely been a vital driver of cooperation since the sharing of resources and services reinforces the participating navies.

At BALTRON's 25th anniversary celebration in 2023, it was emphasised that the project has significantly enhanced the Baltic navies' overall quality, professional personnel development, and NATO-aligned practices. Over the years, the BALTRON Squadron has included over 25 vessels and participated in more than 100 exercises.[51] Despite the festive mood at the 25th anniversary, it was symbolic that only Latvian and Lithuanian vessels attended the ceremony in Rīga.

BALTNET

BALTNET, or the Baltic Air Surveillance Network, was established in 1998 to help the Baltic States jointly monitor their airspace. The project commenced operations in 2000. Norway played a central role in coordinating external assistance and emerged as the primary contributor, though the project was based on a significant initial American contribution. As with BALTRON, BALTNET has received relatively little attention in the relevant literature.

The establishment of BALTNET was not straightforward. Tensions among the Baltic States escalated to the point where it threatened the project itself, particularly regarding whether to establish separate control and reporting centres in each state or a single location and where that single location should be. Jermalavičius described this Baltic spat as "much "bloodletting"".[52] In the end, Lithuania's Karmėlava became the single Baltic control and reporting centre, supported by national nodes.

With Baltic States joining NATO, BALTNET was included into the Alliance's Integrated Air and Missile Defence System. In 2007, the Karmėlava centre evolved as the Combined Control and Reporting Centre, which featured an annual rotation of commanders from each Baltic state.[53] As of 2020, the single centre was substituted with three interoperable national control and reporting centres in Karmėlava, Tallinn and Lielvārde, each operating separately but able to back up each other.[54]

Thus, in a way, Baltic air surveillance underwent a full circle – from "bloodletting" over which country would host the control and reporting centre to three such centres in the end. This irony should not overshadow the merits of the early BALTNET years, crucial in establishing an effective and NATO-compatible Baltic air monitoring capability.

BALTNET is connected to the trilateral support and collaboration between host nations to facilitate the Baltic Air Policing mission, a NATO operation conducted by allied fighter jets from Lithuania's Zokniai airbase since 2004 and Estonia's Ämari airbase since the mission's expansion in 2014.

Before 2014, air policing was a contentious issue, with Estonia seeking to host the mission on a rotational basis.[55] Russia's aggression against Ukraine largely resolved this matter, leading to the mission's expansion to include an additional airfield, Ämari, that could be used permanently. Latvia's military airfield at Lielvārde has been developed as a reinforcement hub and can take even the largest NATO aircraft. Most often it has hosted military helicopters and drones. In 2024, Lielvārde temporarily replaced Ämari as a base for air policing during renovations.

BALTDEFCOL

The Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL) was established in 1999 in Tartu, Estonia, with Sweden as the primary external contributor but initially with a Danish Commandant, Michael Clemmesen,[56] who set up the College and was Commandant until the Baltic States' NATO accession. The College is considered the most successful of the BALT projects. While other joint Baltic initiatives may have appeared more practical or appealing, BALTDEFCOL remains the only significant project to endure as a permanent and trilateral endeavour.

By the late 1990s, the Baltic States' armed forces were growing, leading to an increased demand for advanced officer

training. Western partners offered substantial assistance, training Baltic officers at little or no cost. However, this support was not sustainable. As in other non-military areas where the Western partners assisted the new states, the support would begin to wane over time, and the diverse doctrines among various partners made compatibility with Baltic needs challenging.[57] In other words, the Baltic States had to become gradually independent in this area.

As BALTDEFCOL started its operations, Jermalavičius noted that most joint staff officers received their education there. With no alternatives at the national level, the three nations became "…mutually dependent on each other in this area".[58] This is also the situation today. This might partly explain the longevity and relative concord of this project.

Although the Baltic Defence College is a prime example of trilateral cooperation, it has faced less publicised challenges from inter-Baltic rivalry. Jermalavičius, Lawrence, and Merilind noted frequent conflicts regarding the direction chosen by different college commandants, with one Baltic State even threatening to withdraw from the college over the BALTNET dispute.[59]

Despite the challenges, BALTDEFCOL has operated for a quarter century and celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2024. It offers courses for military and civilian personnel from the Baltic States as well as to their Allies and partners. It describes itself as "the only English-language professional military education (PME) institution in continental Europe."[60] Since its founding, around two thousand persons have graduated from different courses at the college.[61]

It is also notable that BALTDEFCOL organises the Annual Baltic Military History Conference and the Annual Baltic Conference on Defence and publishes a peer-reviewed academic Journal on Baltic Security.[62] Thus, the college is a hub for broader intellectual discussions and complements other academic institutions in Tartu.

Beyond the practical benefits gained at the BALTDEFCOL by students of various ranks (up to and including generals), over the last quarter-century it has provided intangible benefits which may have an even more significant effect in the longer term. During the various courses, officers and civilians, primarily from the Baltic States but also from many other countries, develop lasting friendships, mutual understanding and respect, which otherwise would be difficult to achieve so broadly and at such levels. Later, when in command or staff appointments, it is much easier to communicate with former fellow students in Allied and partner countries. This leads to improved cooperation and could have an even greater importance in times of crisis or conflict.

Other Elements of Baltic Military Cooperation

Although the BALT projects already examined are the most prominent aspects of Baltic trilateral cooperation, they are connected to various other initiatives and frameworks, such as the host nation support for the Baltic Air Policing mission.

Over the years, several other little-known Baltic projects have been initiated and suspended for different reasons. These include BALTCCIS, the Baltic Command, Control and Information System; BALTPERS, a system for registering and managing military personnel; BALTMED, the Baltic Medical Unit; BALTLOG, the Baltic Logistics System; and BALTDISLEARN, the Baltic Distance Learning initiative.

Apart from projects, the cooperation between the Baltic defence ministries and armed forces is well organised, ensuring consistent interaction. It features four committees at varying levels. The top tier is the Ministerial Committee, composed of Baltic defence ministers, with opportunities for ministers from other countries to participate, such as joint meetings with Polish and Ukrainian counterparts. Next is the Military Committee, which comprises commanders and chiefs of staff from the Baltic armed

forces. Additionally, there is the Policy Coordination Committee, consisting of policy directors from the Baltic defence ministries, and the Defence Coordination Committee, which includes representatives from the Baltic defence ministries and armed forces. Every year, one of the Baltic States takes on the rotating presidency of military cooperation in the region. In 2024, Lithuania led Baltic trilateral cooperation.[63]

Another Baltic cooperation format that deserves attention is the Baltic Combined Joint Staff Element (B-CJSE), formed in 2015. It primarily focuses on coordinating Baltic defence planning at the operational level, with a growing alignment of its activities with the NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs). The composition of the B-CJSE varies based on specific needs, and it is assembled whenever necessary.[64]

There is also consistent interaction between Baltic military volunteer organisations: the Estonian Defence League, the Latvian National Guard, and the Lithuanian National Defence Volunteer Force. Trilateral Baltic cooperation is also reflected in cyber defence encompassing operational aspects, such as among the computer emergency response teams, and policymaking.

Finally, military defence cooperation in the Baltic region is integrated with more generic political frameworks, namely the interparliamentary Baltic Assembly and the intergovernmental Baltic Council of Ministers. One of the Assembly's components is the Security and Defence Committee, which includes parliamentarians from all three nations. A key priority for the Committee in 2024 was enhancing military mobility.[65]

Contrasting Baltic Military Cultures and Mutual Perceptions

While the Baltic States and their armed forces may appear similar, significant differences have complicated the BALT projects and deeper trilateral cooperation. Some of the disagreements were

already mentioned when discussing BALTNET and BALTDEFCOL. These disparities continue to pose challenges to improved cooperation.

Other apparent reasons, like competing national interests, sovereignty, and personalities, pose complications, compounded by two more prominent Baltic-specific factors – divergent military cultures and varying outside partners.

Writing in 2013, Mölder categorised Estonia as strongly aligned with the Nordic model of military culture, which includes total defence, conscription, and self-reliance. In contrast, Latvia at that time followed the European model, characterised by a professional army and voluntary citizen participation. Meanwhile, Lithuania adhered to the European model, albeit with reservations.[66] Both Latvia and Lithuania gave up conscription in the 2000s, while Estonia has maintained it since its renewed independence up to the present day. While Latvia and Lithuania still regarded Russia with suspicion, small standing forces and a national guard seemed sufficient, given NATO's defence umbrella. Estonia adhered to the total defence system, having been persuaded of its importance by Finland. After all, Finland was the only regional partner to have fought to defend its territory against the Soviet Union with substantial success.

Another notable reason for the differing military cultures was the partners involved with each Baltic State. On the one hand, some of the partnerships had similar impacts. These include the lead nations supporting the BALT initiatives: Denmark for BALTBAT, Germany for BALTRON, Norway for BALTNET, and Sweden for BALTDEFCOL.

On the other hand, apart from the BALT projects, which involved only one Western coordination nation, there were additional layers of cooperation in the early years after regaining independence. Paulauskas noted that Denmark emerged as the "tutor" for Lithuania, Sweden for Latvia, and Finland for Estonia, providing different perspectives and advice.[67] Though these Nordic

countries were similar in many other ways, there were significant variations in their defence policies and external alignments. Only one of the three was a NATO member at the time. Also, Mölder noted a significant Finnish impact on Estonian military culture, whereas he credited Poland with a more substantial influence on Lithuania. In his opinion, Latvia lacked a specific mentor that notably shaped its military culture.[68]

In a more recent evaluation, Atmante, Kaljurand, and Jermalavičius largely echoed previously mentioned views on Baltic military cultures. However, they noted "a wholesale reorientation" of Latvian and Lithuanian military cultures, almost wholly focusing on their self-defence following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014.[69] Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has undoubtedly pushed both countries even further towards implementing the total defence approach and thus closer to Estonian military culture.

The diverse military cultures have fostered mutual mistrust and criticism. For instance, Estonian officials and experts frequently criticised Latvian defence. For example, in 2012, a commentary in a prominent Estonian outlet titled "Estonia's biggest security vulnerability is Latvia" highlighted opinions from Estonian officials and experts who strongly criticised the state of the Latvian National Armed Forces.[70] Also, the ex-Commander of the Estonian Defence Forces, Ants Laaneots, publicly criticised Latvia, emphasising that Estonia must also be ready to defend its southern border if an enemy enters Latvia.[71]

Latvia has also encountered criticism from Lithuania. A Lithuanian academic notes that Latvia and Estonia are viewed differently there. Estonia garners respect for consistently prioritising defence spending, maintaining a robust conscription system, and having an effective reserve system. Consequently, the Estonian defence model is perceived as exemplary. In contrast, Latvia's defence system suffers from a poor reputation, mainly due to years of inadequate funding, a delay in reinstating conscription, and

limited firepower.[72] Interestingly, an official from Latvia observes that their Estonian and Lithuanian counterparts do not express these criticisms during their interactions.[73]

Baltic Military Cooperation Before Russia's Full-scale Invasion of Ukraine

Prior studies have thoroughly evaluated Baltic military cooperation, with a near-universal consensus that it was most active and effective before the Baltic States acceded to NATO. It was evident in the 1990s that the Baltic States were predominantly motivated not by trilateral cooperation but rather by this cooperation format as a tool to achieve NATO membership. Jermalavičius aptly described the initial ten years of Baltic military cooperation as "Go West, together." He emphasised that only the support from Western nations made the BALT projects possible. In his view, these projects allowed the building of Western-like militaries, helped develop actual military capabilities and facilitated "interoperability of minds" among the Baltic States and their partners.[74]

Had the BALT projects not been implemented or disintegrated earlier, the Baltic path to NATO would probably have been more complicated. Their armed forces might have developed even more divergent military cultures and capabilities. It can be argued that Baltic accession to NATO occurred during a very narrow window of opportunity. Without these various cooperation projects, involving many NATO Allies and partners, the lack of understanding and suspicion of the Baltic States might have been greater and their chances of swift membership in 2004 slimmer.

Many studies suggest that the time following the Baltic States' NATO admission led to diminished military cooperation among them. Nikers and Tabuns wrote, "...since joining NATO in 2004, defence cooperation has suffered due to competition and a lack of trust between the three states."[75] Jermalavičius similarly called the phase after the membership to NATO as "National ambitions

and constraints strike back". He considered that after five years in NATO, the "...Baltic military cooperation is at a certain crossroads and has lost much of its appeal and idealist zeal". He summarised the factors at play: "foreign disengagement, diverging national responses to NATO's global strategy, and competitive instincts..."[76] Vanaga added some other points, like the uneven defence spending and the Estonian criticism of the other two states for failing to spend enough and personal conflicts, particularly within the defence ministries.[77]

Over the last decade, numerous articles have emphasised the missed opportunities of the Baltic States due to inadequate collaboration. In 2013, Lawrence and Jermalavičius noted that "the Baltic states do not cooperate in defence to the extent that they might... Concrete progress in this area in the last ten years has, however, been limited."[78] Similarly, Vanaga wrote in 2016 that there remains a deficiency in collaboratively developed military capabilities to support Baltic defence. She also observed that Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 did not produce a significant change of course.[79] Writing as recently as in 2022, also Česnakas noted that Baltic cooperation was not sufficiently extensive "...despite the fact they face nearly similar challenges and have similar defence development projects."[80]

Indeed, from 2004 until 2022, there were no significant new initiatives among the Baltic States. Meanwhile, some earlier initiatives faced challenges, notably after Estonia departed from the BALTRON squadron element. While the BALTBAT idea has reincarnated into NATO Response Force rotations, this did not materialise in deployments. The concept of a joint Baltic brigade has been discussed but, in the view of a Latvian official, has not succeeded for two reasons: the NATO framework that encompasses the Baltic States' defence and the issue of sovereignty – specifically, which country the brigade would prioritise in the event of a conflict.[81]

A frequently discussed issue has been the absence of joint Baltic procurement. There are essentially no significant success

stories in trilateral military procurement. A rare joint Baltic purchase as part of the European Defence Agency procurement resulted in a one-fifth price increase.[82] While the Latvian and Lithuanian defence sectors struggled with limited funding during their first decade as NATO members, henceforth the Baltic States adopted diverging priorities and partnerships. Lithuania, for example, has focused on strengthening ties with Germany, resulting in a significant portion of its equipment being sourced from German manufacturers. In contrast, Latvia and Estonia have opted for a more diverse set of suppliers.

Jermalavičius previously hinted that the absence of joint procurement is linked to corruption and a resulting unwillingness to enhance transparency in Latvia and Lithuania.[83] While this might be a factor, it is more likely that diverging interests and different national procedures, which become even more problematic when combined, have complicated joint procurement. In addition, as a Latvian official underlines, joint procurements are not the main goal. The primary aim is to ensure compatibility with all Allies, including Lithuania and Estonia.[84]

Finally, at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, Jermalavičius, Lawrence and Merilind added other explanations for why Baltic defence cooperation has been relatively sidelined. These are essentially the consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014: larger Baltic defence budgets and, thus, the ability and incentive to conduct procurement individually. Growing Allied military presence in the Baltic States has consumed host nation financial and human resources and has also trumped Baltic cooperation.[85]

In a nutshell, here is the current Baltic dilemma: to prioritise tri-Baltic military cooperation or to place a greater emphasis on working with the three different framework nations for NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltics – the United Kingdom in Estonia, Canada in Latvia, and Germany in Lithuania – and thereby the Alliance in general.

The Baltic Vector in Current Baltic Defence Strategies

Continuing the focus on various external partnerships and the complications they entail, the national security and defence documents of the Baltic States reveal further nuances.

The current Baltic external defence cooperation vectors underline the priority of other military powers capable of significantly enhancing national defence capabilities. NATO and its collective defence system provide the framework. The United States is the leading strategic partner. In addition, nations responsible for the eFP battlegroups are among the principal partners.

Latvia's 2023 State Defence Concept most emphasises Baltic cooperation. "Deepening and integrating the defence cooperation of the Baltic states is a prerequisite for more effective action in defence of the region... Joint plans and models of action for mutual support, as well as joint efforts in the development of the military capabilities of the Baltic States, are important directions for the further deepening cooperation between the Baltic States." Among external strategic partnerships, the Baltic partnership ranks just below those with the United States and Canada.[86] Since 2014, the United States has rotated small units in Latvia, while Canada has been leading NATO's eFP battlegroup (now a brigade) since 2017.

Lithuania's National Security Strategy of 2021 mentions each Baltic State separately concerning military defence. First, in the context of improving collective defence in the region, aiming "to strengthen military cooperation and interaction with allies and partners in the region, primarily with ... Poland, ... Latvia and ... Estonia..." This comes after underlining the role of the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The same document also aims "to strengthen cooperation and coordination on the representation of common interests in the field of security and defence with ... Latvia and ... Estonia, to develop joint projects strengthening the security of the Baltic States..." before turning to Sweden and Finland. Here, though, among the bilateral and

multilateral cooperation directions, the Baltic vector follows a bunch of other allied countries – the United States, Poland, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France.[87]

Estonia's National Security Concept of 2023 is less organised and defined regarding external defence partnerships. It underlines the positive effects of Finland and Sweden joining NATO and that "…Estonia actively participates in the design of a new unified regional security solution." The document discusses the Baltic States' military defence, yet it does not address their trilateral military cooperation. The Estonian document also declares that "Estonia proceeds from the understanding that the Baltic States are one area of operation."[88]

These documents indicate that Latvia places greater importance on trilateral military cooperation than Lithuania and Estonia. This generally aligns with the observations of Nikers and Tabuns, who wrote that "…Latvia is the most positive towards defence cooperation with the other Baltic countries. Estonia moderately prioritises this issue and Lithuania appears to be the least interested…" Furthermore, they conclude that trilateral cooperation has a "low profile political priority" for all three.[89]

Baltic Military Cooperation since 2022

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has not significantly altered trilateral Baltic States' military cooperation. While the Baltic States have been among Ukraine's staunchest supporters at the political and financial levels, and Russia's loudest critics, this has not translated into significantly closer trilateral military cooperation.

One of the trilateral initiatives that deserves mentioning is the Baltic Defence Line – a set of fortifications on the Baltic States' borders with Russia and Belarus, which was formally agreed on in January 2024.[90] It would have been strange had the Baltic States not constructed such fortifications or done so independently. On

the other hand, this is not an entirely joint project since each state constructs the line according to its own specific needs and circumstances.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there have been instances of Baltic coordination regarding military procurements. Formally through independent processes, all three Baltic States are acquiring HIMARS, the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, from the United States, and they intend to collaborate in their operation.[91] Latvia and Estonia are also collectively purchasing IRIS-T air defence systems from Germany.[92]

As discussed, becoming members of NATO has relaxed trilateral cooperation. Membership of the Alliance also sets the tone for the current levels of trilateral cooperation. The defence of all three states is, first and foremost, planned as part of NATO's collective defence system. Thus, not only do all three share a consensus on strategic matters within NATO, but consistent and extensive multi-layered collaboration exists within the Alliance. Officials and military representatives maintain ongoing communication regarding various mutual interests.

With all three countries significantly integrated into NATO's overall defence and deterrence strategy, this has become a priority, particularly with the framework nations of NATO's eFP in the Baltics. Apart from these, the Baltic States also prioritise their interactions with the United States, whose forces rotate through the Baltic States, and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), led by the United Kingdom.

As an expert from Estonia points out, small nations must be discerning in such situations due to limited resources.[93] Also, a Lithuanian expert emphasises that advancing trilateral relations is complicated under current conditions. The expert believes that, as security consumers, the Baltic States rightly prioritise seeking support from security providers. They should simultaneously work together to solidify the security provided by the multinational battlegroups and the United States. This need takes precedence

over the Baltic States' requirement to deepen their integration with one another.[94]

The primary Baltic interests over the past years have been to increase the NATO battlegroups to at least brigade size. This needed to be done primarily in close conjunction with the three different framework nations. Although the framework nations have consulted together, their approach to the battlegroups and to enlargement to brigade size has been different. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the partnerships with framework nations are more important in the short term than military cooperation at a purely Baltic level. The real coordination took place at the political level. Still, even here, the approach to achieving the same eFP presence has varied between the three states and even among decision-makers within individual countries.

Notes

[27] Kažociņš, J. – personal experience in 1993 and 1994 as the United Kingdom's first Defence Attaché to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Dilāns, A. (2015). "Baltijas miera uzturēšanas spēku bataljonam 20 gadi: ieguvumi no šī projekta."

[30] Per Carlsen (1948-2020) served as the Danish ambassador to Lithuania, Russia, and Latvia during his career.

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[32] Ito, P. (2013). "Baltic Military Cooperative Projects: a Record of Success." p. 269.

[33] Dilāns, A. (2015). "Baltijas miera uzturēšanas spēku bataljonam 20 gadi: ieguvumi no šī projekta."

[34] Kažociņš, J. – personal experience.

[35] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia / Latvijas Vēstnesis. (2023). "Aizsardzības nozares budžets sasniedz 2,25% no Latvijas iekšzemes kopprodukta". 10.03.2023. *https://lvportals.lv/dienaskartiba/349802-aizsardzibas-nozares-budzets-sasniedz-225-no-latvijas-iekszemes-kopprodukta-2023*

[36] Article 3: "In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack" (NATO. (1949). The North Atlantic Treaty. *https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm*).

[37] Article 5: "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security" (NATO. (1949). The North Atlantic Treaty).

38 Dilāns, A. (2015). "Baltijas miera uzturēšanas spēku bataljonam 20 gadi: ieguvumi no šī projekta."

39 Ito, P. (2013). "Baltic Military Cooperative Projects: a Record of Success." p. 240.

40 Austin, D. (1999). NATO Expansion and the Baltic States. Conflict Studies Research Centre. p. 1.

41 Ito, P. (2013). "Baltic Military Cooperative Projects: a Record of Success." pp. 254-255.

42 Dilāns, A. (2015). "Baltijas miera uzturēšanas spēku bataljonam 20 gadi: ieguvumi no šī projekta."

43 Vaiksnoras, V. (2002). The Role of Baltic Defence Co-operation for the Security of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. p. 19.

44 Dilāns, A. (2015). "Baltijas miera uzturēšanas spēku bataljonam 20 gadi: ieguvumi no šī projekta."

45 Vaiksnoras, V. (2002). The Role of Baltic Defence Co-operation for the Security of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. pp. 22-25.

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[53] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia. (n.d.). "Cooperation of Air Forces." *https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/nozares-politika/international-and-regional-cooperation/regional-cooperation/cooperation-air-forces*

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[55] Jermalavičius, T, Lawrence, T. & Merilind, A. L. (2020). "The Potential for and Limitations of Military Cooperation among the Baltic States." p. 291.

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[79] Vanaga, N. (2016). Baltic Military Cooperation: Seeking a Common Response. p. 7.

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[83] Jermalavičius, T. (2009). "Baltic military cooperation: past, present and future." p. 137.

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From Present to Future

The Future Direction of Baltic Military Cooperation

A Baltic cooperation "program maximum" has been proposed by Nikers and Tabuns in 2019. It includes, among other things, a common Baltic defence strategy, a joint crisis secretariat, a joint operational area headquarters, a joint military industry market, joint ammunition and fuel agencies, a joint naval squadron and/or coastal defence, joint air defence command and control, and, ostensibly, eventually also common Baltic armed forces.[95]

From an idealist and pan-Baltic perspective, most of this would seem to be obvious. However, these suggestions would face significant difficulties, including inter-Baltic rivalry, varying priorities, procedures and interests, and concerns over sovereignty. More importantly, a Baltic defence strategy and a joint headquarters must be in lockstep with NATO's relevant regional plans and command and control (C2) systems. In a crisis, the states must be ready to defend themselves alone, but prolonged defence against a much stronger enemy will only be successful within a NATO context. For this reason, regional C2 structures have already been formed. Key among these are the Multinational Corps Headquarters Northeast (HQ MNC-NE) and Multinational Divisional Headquarters Northeast (HQ MND-NE), both in

Poland, and the Multinational Divisional Headquarters North (HQ MND-N) in Latvia.

This configuration already highlights the importance of a broader regional view, especially regarding the vital land bridge between the Baltic States and other NATO territory. This is the Suwalki Gap, a 104 km wide stretch of border between Lithuania and Poland. To the west, it is bordered by Russia's Kaliningrad, and to the east by Belarus. In times of tension or conflict, an adversary would undoubtedly try to close this vital communications link. Therefore, its defence requires coordination beyond merely that of the Baltic States.

Joint ammunition and fuel agencies would encounter the same obstacles as standard fuel prices across the Baltic States, which vary due to various local factors. Additionally, there could be funding and transportation issues that may not be easily resolved.

Air and sea defence for the Baltic States will only be effective within an Allied context. The early military cooperation in these areas led to closer NATO integration after accession to the Alliance in 2004. Common armed forces would face the same obstacles as the idea of a Baltic brigade. Occasionally, the idea of a common European army has been discussed. These suggestions do not advance easily due to complex sovereignty issues and the need for consensus in decision-making. While the European Union plays an increasingly important role in supporting defence, common Baltic armed forces remain as distant as a common BENELUX or Nordic army.

Beyond Improving Baltic Military Cooperation

Times have changed since the Baltic States renewed their independence and embarked on the quest to return to the West, especially after joining NATO. In the early days, Russia's anger and aggression at the loss of its empire were still keenly felt in the Baltics but not in the West, to which they wished to return. Hence the

"peacekeeping" battalion and the other BALT initiatives described earlier. However, these would not have been possible, or at least not as successful, without the strong support of Western partners.

In 2004, with the accession to NATO, these relationships changed in many cases from partners to Allies. Therefore, the drive to receive Western support through Baltic initiatives also transformed into participation in NATO programmes, representation at NATO headquarters and participation in NATO missions and operations. This, quite naturally, led to a wider perspective and the diminution of cooperation among the Baltic States based simply on military necessities.

There are some areas which may not fall obviously within the realm of military cooperation but have a major impact on defence and security and, more importantly, must be managed primarily by the Baltic States themselves. These include resilience and military mobility. In addition, there are issues which require a common Baltic approach but which cannot be solved regionally – these include NATO C2 structures.

The key factor to bear in mind is that the Baltic States are part of one operational theatre. They will sink or swim together and must work together politically and strategically. The more friction there is between them, the lower will be their influence and level of security. It must also be recognised that if Russia were able to control one or more of the Baltic States economically, politically or, indeed, militarily, this would pose a significant challenge to the other two and to NATO in general.

Nevertheless, there are a number of different ways in which the Baltic States would be able to improve their military cooperation on a practical basis. For instance, the need to exercise together is, of course, understood. This largely takes place at a national or NATO level but could also be done at the tri-national level. It is worth stressing again that the Baltic States are one operational theatre. Effective plans for the use of joint fires, air and missile support could be of immense importance during crisis or war.

At the same time, the need to involve Allies, both those serving in the Baltic States and those ready to reinforce them, is essential for the exercises to be of more than symbolic value and to work as practical training exercises. This could be likened to the early Baltic cooperation projects which would not have been so successful without the support and active participation of Western partners.

The question of air policing and air defence for the Baltic States also needs to be addressed. An air policing mission was appropriate during a period when the Russian Federation was not pursuing an aggressive foreign and military policy. Now, with the attack on Ukraine, policing alone is not sufficient. The Baltic States cannot afford to provide fighter air defence themselves but the period of talking about the need for this must be drawn to a conclusion.

Similarly, the whole question of air and missile defence of the NATO eastern border needs to be looked at from more than merely a Baltic States perspective. As has been evident in Ukraine, air defence needs to be layered. Short, medium and long-range air defence and sophisticated missile defence are all needed to deal with the large array of Russian missiles being fired on an almost daily basis against Ukraine. This is well beyond the budgets and capabilities of the Baltic States. Therefore, NATO Allies must be persuaded by a joint Baltic approach to look more carefully at common funding for air and missile defence of the eastern flank.

Given the range of the various missile systems being used by Russia against Ukraine, we must assume that they will also be used against Western European countries in a possible conflict. That means air defence along the eastern boundary of NATO also provides air defence for countries which are a significant distance away from Russia's borders. Of course, this will entail additional NATO common funding. But this is not an impossible goal to reach bearing in mind the costs of deterrence failure for the whole Alliance.

At the same time, there is a significant overall lack of modern air defence resources available to NATO, especially in Europe. Of course, not only modern air defence is required, for instance, to tackle threats from Shahed-type drones. Nevertheless, modern air defence is essential for addressing more sophisticated threats. This means that European NATO countries, in particular, need to focus on developing and increasing the production and availability of air defence assets, particularly those that have proven effective in Ukraine.

A successful example of common procurement between Estonia and Latvia is the contract to buy IRIS-T air defence systems, for Latvia the largest military purchase since renewed independence.[96] Lithuania, as the only one among the Baltic States, operates a medium-range air defence system, NASAMS. But it is also likely to buy IRIS-T.[97] There are obvious logistic benefits, including spare parts and maintenance, which could be cooperative. Also, coordination in war would be easier.

On the other hand, there are also many negative examples regarding Baltic procurements and the choice of platforms. Most recently, Latvia skipped the chance of every Baltic state operating CV-90 infantry fighting vehicles. Estonia already operates such vehicles, and Lithuania is expected to procure them.[98] Meanwhile, almost concurrently with the Lithuanian choice, Latvia picked Spanish-made ASCOD infantry fighting vehicles.[99]

Joint procurements and choosing identical platforms should not be an aim in itself. Procurements are complex endeavours even for a single nation, and they tend to become more complicated when two or more countries join forces. Legislation, procedures, timelines, and budgets differ, and issues like corruption and mismanagement have also been seen.

Looking at broader terms, even NATO lacks a common procurement system, unified weapon systems, standardized servicing, and, indeed, a joint research and development (R&D) system. After 75 years, the Alliance still struggles with issues such as

155mm artillery ammunition (the barrel rifling and charge bag composition differ between different systems).

Also, individual countries have industries that can sell, participate in, or benefit from specific arms sales. An arms sales contract can often include a provision for local manufacturing of components or accessories. This not only reduces the price but is an incentive for local industry and may provide export potential.

The area where real cooperation would be most beneficial and realistically possible is in munitions, especially for infantry fighting vehicles and artillery. This is not straightforward, but it could be of immense value if such munitions could be easily transferred from one country to another. The development of military industry is currently ongoing, including the production of artillery munitions.[100] Ideally, this should not be a Baltic competition but an opportunity for real collaboration.

Geography and Military Mobility

It is an old adage that "armchair generals" talk about tactics while professional generals talk and plan logistics. The small size of the Baltic States, the large hostile neighbour to the east and the Baltic Sea to the west make the movement of armed forces difficult. In particular, rapid reinforcement and then resupply are problematic. It is of note that during the Cold War, defending the inner-German border NATO Allies had approximately 35 divisional equivalents, each with two or three brigades.[101] This was against the Warsaw Pact – admittedly a stronger force than the Russian Federation.

However, there was depth to this defence in the form of other western European nations. This is a form of reassurance the Baltic States do not have. Moreover, the land border between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, on the one hand, and Russia, Belarus, on the other, is longer than the inner-German border during the Cold War. Yet, in addition to the small Baltic armed forces, NATO is

planning to station only one brigade in each. This means that during a time of tension, rapid reinforcement and resupply are of the greatest importance.

This relies on fast military mobility. Its effectiveness results from a combination of well prepared, trained and ready-to move armed forces, efficient cross-border agreements, robust infrastructure and, even, prepositioned equipment. In the case of the Baltic States this should already be in place. More detailed scrutiny of these arrangements would be beneficial.

Cross-border agreements, including for weapons and munitions, exist but are bureaucratic and their formats are designed for peace-time use. These should be reviewed to make them seamless. In time of war, bureaucratic procedures may not matter. But a significant part of deterrence is to demonstrate that reinforcements are available and can reach their battle positions before hostilities begin. That is the reason why this is a priority, especially in and between the Baltic States.

The inland border between the Baltic States and the potential adversaries, Russia and Belarus, is about 1750km long. Yet the Baltic States' land border with other NATO territory is only 104km – the Suwalki gap between Lithuania and Poland. Good and swift communications are essential to make this passage effective at a time of crisis.

Road transport offers limited scope for fast reinforcement, so the development of the Rail Baltica project is an important enhancement. This project, largely funded by the European Union, is due to provide a European standard gauge rail link stretching from Estonia to Poland, so will be of significant strategic importance. Currently, the Baltic States mainly operate the so-called Soviet gauge railways, while the European gauge railway has been extended only from Poland to Kaunas in Lithuania. The project has been plagued by substantial cost increases and disputes about priorities. All of this delays implementation and consequently the effectiveness of military mobility. Its primary military role would

be reinforcement prior to conflict. After that, it would require adequate air and missile defence.

Other physical infrastructure also has a bearing on military mobility. For instance, bridges built on key routes during the period of Soviet occupation are mostly suitable for the passage of Russian tanks, which are lighter than most NATO tanks. Equally, on rail lines, including Rail Baltica, it is essential that the widths and heights of tunnels and cuttings are sufficient to accommodate NATO's heavy equipment. These factors must all be re-examined from the military mobility viewpoint since this infrastructure has been primarily meant for civilian and commercial use.

NATO Command and Control (C2)

The strategic rapid reinforcement and resupply of the Baltic States has already been highlighted. But with the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, an alternative route is available. From a military logistics perspective, Sweden's Gothenburg is likely to become the most important port in northern Europe. It is sufficiently remote from Russian attack, though air and missiles could pose a threat. But it is also able to be a hub for two important operational theatres: the High North and the Baltic region.

The High North is of strategic importance to the Alliance, and especially the United States, because of the Russian facilities based in the Kola Peninsula. These include Russia's critical second-strike nuclear capability as well as submarines to interdict trans-Atlantic shipping. For these reasons Russia will give it a high priority and, therefore, logistic support by sea to this region is likely to be very dangerous. Therefore, land routes will become more important.

At the same time, Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership provides a credible alternative to the vulnerable Suwalki Gap. It is misleading to talk about the Baltic Sea as a "NATO lake" because Russia still retains powerful naval and submarine forces both in

its Finnish Gulf territory and in Kaliningrad. Nevertheless, safeguarding passage becomes easier. Logistic supply by sea is important not only for the Baltic States but also for Finland.

That means that coordinating the protection of sea routes is a higher, but realistic, priority for the Baltic and Nordic States and hence for NATO. Here, work will need to be done on C2 coordination. The High North is overseen by NATO Supreme Allied Command Transformation, based in Norfolk, the United States – understandably for American strategic interest. The Baltic region falls within NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe's remit, delegated to the Allied Joint Force Command Headquarters Brunssum, the Netherlands.

This provides a headache for NATO commanders. Not having unified command of those forces providing logistical support and those in need is an artificial and damaging division. Russia is known to have exploited boundaries as areas of weakness before. Clearly, Norway, Sweden and Finland cannot be cut in half in latitude, so a more sophisticated and workable solution will need to be found. Nevertheless, the solution will not be an easy one because defence of the Baltic States without the support of Poland and Germany within the same chain of command is difficult to envisage. However, they in turn need to be part of a broader European command structure. For 75 years NATO has learnt to find workable compromises. This one requires the active engagement of Baltic planners since the outcome could be critical for realistic defence in the case of a Russian attack.

Situational Awareness

Since renewed independence, the Baltic States have experienced many other kinds of Russian pressure, from information operations to the use of money to buy influence or for corruption. Although this may not seem an area of interest for Baltic military cooperation, there are hidden military risks. For instance, the rise

in popularity of paint-ball clubs in Latvia before 2014 was of concern. When the participants engaged in pseudo-military firefights wearing Russian military clothing and adapted Russian weapons, this became a potential threat and was more heavily regulated by the appropriate services.

To put this into context, it is sufficient to look at the Russian take-over of Crimea in 2014, almost without a shot being fired. It seems that Russia was convinced that a similar scenario would play out in February 2022 because of their preparations in the whole of Ukraine. Yet Ukrainian military and civil resistance to outright invasion was much stronger than the anticipated support for Russia. The Baltic States must learn from such examples and avoid the possibility of hostile groups being formed to oppose national freedom.

While such activity seems less likely while the Russian war in Ukraine continues, it must be assumed that the Russian intelligence agencies learn from their mistakes. They have been shown to do so in the past. Therefore, attempts to undermine Baltic military and security structures must be anticipated. This requires the close sharing of intelligence both at the military and civilian levels.

The Baltic intelligence and security services work well together and have developed a high degree of mutual trust, sometimes helping each other with very sensitive matters. This must continue to develop and should be used to pass relevant intelligence to Allies and partners using already existing international fora.

New Ways of War

It is an old saying that generals plan to fight the last war – only to do it better. To be clear – the last war is the one which we are witnessing taking place in Ukraine at this time. That means that we should not merely help the Ukrainians be successful in their defence against Russian aggression, but we should be looking at

the ways in which this war is developing new technologies of a kind which have not been used in major warfare before.

Since Arquilla and Ronfeldt wrote their "Swarming and the Future of Conflict"[102] about the way that warfare has developed over the ages, we have not seen these changes come into effect on a large scale until the war in Ukraine. They described four types of war. The first is melee – this essentially means largely disorganised forces fighting it out together. Whoever is left standing is the winner.

As warfare developed, it became evident that organised forces were much more effective against such disorganised forces and therefore the concept of mass was developed. This dates back many centuries but arguably reached its highest point during the First World War when both sides used mass, reaching a stalemate, particularly on the Western Front. The consequences of this were massive casualties.

Therefore, commanders gradually learnt to use the indirect approach. That is not charging straight at machine guns but rather finding ways of bypassing them by attacking an enemy from the flank or from behind. This became what we understand as manoeuvre, which was extensively used during the Second World War. Manoeuvre was also the basis for NATO defensive planning during the Cold War, particularly on the Central Front.

Manoeuvre has great advantages. Ukraine used manoeuvre very successfully in the expulsion of Russian forces from north-east Ukraine in 2022. However, it was not the end of the story. The Ukrainian offensive planned with Western assistance in the summer and autumn of 2023 proved to be a massive failure. This was largely because of the defensive work which had been done by Russia in creating the so-called Surovikin lines. These made manoeuvre nearly impossible and led to high Ukrainian losses of equipment and manpower, especially with the lack of air cover.

In late 2024, Ukraine appeared to be on the back foot while Russian troops were steadily advancing in the Donbas. Russia's tactics still appeared to be based on mass but at a horrific cost.

Large numbers of soldiers were being sacrificed. The British Armed Forces estimated that during October 2024, Russia was losing over 1500 soldiers killed and wounded every day.[103]

At the same time, we have seen a new form of warfare enter the combat area. That is what Arquilla and Ronfeldt referred to as a swarm. Initially, this has been seen as the rapidly growing use of individual, often first-person view (FPV) drones, which are directly controlled by drone operators. They are able, at relatively little cost for the drone and its control systems to destroy extremely expensive armoured vehicles. Increasingly, these drones are used in groups and help each other. For instance, some provide intelligence information or surveillance while others are involved directly in attacking opposing forces, whether they are armoured, mechanised or on foot.

This technology is developing extremely quickly and is certain to affect the way that future wars will be fought. Ukraine, being directly involved is, of course, devoting the greatest amount of effort into developing these capabilities. In the future, we could see a large number of armed autonomous platforms, airborne, ground-based, sea-based, working together according to set algorithms and controlled by artificial intelligence (AI). These would be able to receive intelligence directly from sensors such as satellites or other airborne devices, and sea and land-based sensors such as radars. Such systems would be able to change their attack or defence direction at speeds which are incomparable to those which are needed for decision-making in traditional brigade, divisional or higher headquarters.

Such aerial, ground and sea drones with machine guns or anti-tank or anti-ship weapons are substantially cheaper than the armoured vehicles, tanks and ships they can destroy. Consequently, the cost of using traditional armoured vehicles to attack will become much greater. That means that even without large numbers of soldiers, it may be possible to defend a region much more effectively and at much reduced cost.

What this means for the Baltic States is that in a limited number of years it may become possible to organise this kind of defence on their borders with Russia and Belarus. This paper has already discussed the difficulty of providing large scale in-place NATO forces in the Baltic States. This new swarm technology may provide effective defence using fewer troops. Comparatively lighter Allied forces might be required to support Baltic defence. This would only be possible if the prerequisite enablers including long-range weapons, effective logistics, air and missile defence, would be in place. If this technology could impact Baltic defence capabilities significantly, then this must be a priority field for military, scientific, technological and production cooperation. The Drone Coalition supporting Ukraine, led by Latvia and the United Kingdom,[104] is a good start.

This new technology needs to be developed extremely carefully. There are substantial risks involved in the use of AI, even without combining AI with weapons. There is a negative aspect to this technology, and that is closely aligned with ethical choices. Using algorithms controlled by AI, we would effectively be giving permission for machines to make life or death choices against human beings. This sounds morally repugnant but may become necessary. Small countries, such as the Baltic States, would find it very difficult to protect themselves in other ways.

Therefore, it is extremely important for the Baltic States, NATO and the European Union to devote sufficient resources for research and development of new weapons systems, including these, which could provide realistic forward defence (and thus deterrence) to the Baltic States. Currently, the Baltic States provide less than 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) to research and development (R&D).[105] A reasonable goal to aim for in R&D is 4% of GDP because this will develop not just defence capabilities but also ever faster changes in science and technology with benefits well beyond defence.

Future Challenges and the Role of Resilience

Russia has sustained substantial losses in terms of equipment and manpower during its war against Ukraine. The consequence is that it will take time for it to regain the military capabilities it had in February 2022. Despite massive investment in armament production, Russia was not able to replace all battlefield equipment losses at the end of 2024. The use of North Korean troops as well as munitions also signals a shortage of manpower.

While these factors constrain Russia during its active war in Ukraine, in the event of a ceasefire of some sort, it may give it the opportunity to start to regenerate depleted forces in other areas, for instance, those facing the Baltic States. However, Russia will need time to rearm, regroup and replan to pose a formidable military threat to NATO, especially since Finland and Sweden have joined the Alliance. It would also be unlikely to leave its flanks open against Ukraine and thus would continue sustaining a significant military presence in the occupied territories. Therefore, even a short-notice, successful conventional attack against one or more of the Baltic States is unlikely within the next few years, especially given the much higher readiness of NATO Allies in the Baltics.

Nevertheless, Russia's goal of restoring its "rightful" place on the world stage will motivate it to continue activities against the West. This will have been empowered by the feeble Western response to Russia's hybrid aggression acts in recent years. This has included assassinations and sabotage. During the 2024 swap of prisoners between Russia and Western countries, an assassin from the Russian security services, who had shot a dissident in Berlin in broad daylight, was returned to Russia. The message to Russian special service operatives is clear: if they get caught, Russia will get them back.

Therefore, further hybrid attacks to weaken the West must be expected. The Baltic States have not been high on Russia's list of priorities while it is so heavily engaged in Ukraine. Should

there be some kind of ceasefire or a frozen conflict, this is likely to change rapidly. The Baltic States are likely targets with their small populations and vulnerable infrastructure. Defence against hybrid threats is a national responsibility. It is also an area where considerable Baltic cooperation exists in several vulnerable areas.

Accordingly, while the emphasis on military cooperation has been largely on the armed forces, it must now be recognised that defence is a much broader concept. This was highlighted in the Washington NATO Summit Declaration suggesting that hybrid attacks could result in a NATO Article 5 response.[106] Such a declaration is most important because Russia in its war in Ukraine compensates for its lack of success on the battlefield with measures to weaken the Ukrainian state and to intimidate its population. For the Baltic States, increased cooperation and enhanced resilience are matters of extreme urgency. In some areas progress has already been made.

Energy

At the top of the list of priorities must be energy infrastructure and security. If there is no electricity, then both military and civilian communications will be severely affected. Banking and financial transactions and many more daily operations become much more difficult. In winter, heating is compromised as is water supply and sanitation.

Russia recognises this clearly and, therefore, has targeted Ukrainian energy infrastructure with growing intensity, particularly in the run up to and during the coldest months of the year. This can have a substantial effect on morale within the population in general, which translates into morale problems at the front, where soldiers, quite naturally, are worried about their families.

Following this logic, attacks of various sorts on Baltic energy infrastructure should be anticipated. These would seek to be unattributable and short of anything which would generate an

Article 5 response, although what such a response might be is as yet unclear. Since Baltic energy systems are mutually connected and inter-dependent, this is an area where military and security cooperation could be improved.

Vital infrastructure nodes, on which all three countries depend, such as the liquified natural gas (LNG) terminals, gas storage facilities and major hydro-electric dams, require not only physical security (usually provided by civilian security companies) but also military defence in the case of heightened tension or overt aggression. Moreover, they all require air and missile defence. Such defence systems are costly and not easily available. Yet these systems will be few and will probably be concentrated on the defence of high priority military and other infrastructure targets such as airports, ports, and transport hubs. Therefore, energy infrastructure will be in competition with other military requirements. The lack of redundancy (being able to replace destroyed or damaged systems with others), which is effective to some extent in energy-diverse Ukraine, is a significant weakness in the Baltic case.

While Baltic import of energy resources from Russia has largely ceased, the BRELL electricity connections with Russia will only be cut off in early 2025, although all necessary preparations for an early Russian decision to cut have been made. While much work has already been done to prepare for the transition from a Russian to a European system, this relies on a network of electricity connections which will also be difficult to protect.

A particular vulnerability is the network of undersea pipelines. The fragility of pipelines was well demonstrated by the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines between Russia and Germany in September 2022 and the Balticconnector pipeline between Finland and Estonia in October 2023. While it is not clear who was responsible for the former, the anchor of a Hong Kong (China)-registered ship is considered the cause of the latter.

NATO is reviewing plans on how best to protect undersea networks. For the Baltic States, this is an area of particular concern.

Cooperation between the three and with Nordic neighbours must be a high military and security priority.

Communications

Energy pipelines are not the only critical undersea systems. Most internet traffic, without which modern societies, economies and financial flows would find it hard to function, runs underwater. Despite their importance, it is estimated that 100 to 150 cables are severed every year. Most of these occurrences happen due to fishing equipment or anchors, but they are increasingly caused by deliberate hostile actions.[107] Dimitry Medvedev, the Deputy Chairman of Russia's Security Council and former president of Russia, has explicitly warned that Russia could cut off Western communications.[108] Even more disturbing is the actual damage to communication cables linking Sweden and Estonia in October 2023, as well as those connecting Finland to Germany, and Lithuania to Sweden in November 2024.

Satellites provide an alternative method of communication. In particular, Starlink has greatly benefited Ukraine since Russia's invasion, especially during the lengthy defence of Mariupol. However, those systems which are privately owned can be unreliable. Elon Musk, who runs Starlink, denied Ukraine the use of Starlink to hit targets in Crimea.[109] Equally, the bandwidth of satellite communications does not compare to undersea fibre-optic cables.

For the Baltic States, this means that alternative communications, both for military and civilian use, must be identified and agreed upon within the operational region. Alternative cables provide a degree of redundancy in the same way that 5G mobile networks can maintain functionality even when some parts of the network are damaged or destroyed. This set of alternative communications could prove to be of critical importance in a time of heightened crisis when decisions need to be taken rapidly between

many Allies and military units as well as within communities. As much forward planning as possible should be done by Baltic governments and military leadership to prepare for significant interruption of the communications on which all have come to rely.

The importance of military communications is obvious and understood by everyone. However, the role of constant communication by central and local authorities with their populations has not been given as much prominence. More attention should be devoted as to how to communicate with populations at times of immense stress and to ensure that alternative forms of communication channels are open to improve redundancy.

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Conclusions

The first part of this paper describes how the various forms of Baltic military cooperation since renewed independence played a significant role in preparing the Baltic States for NATO. While it also entailed idealist zeal, the cooperation was essentially pragmatic and served as a driver to achieve NATO membership. Without the joint BALT projects in the decade before joining NATO in 2004, the Baltic path towards the Alliance would have been more complex, and the Baltic armed forces would have been less prepared.

Following NATO membership, Baltic trilateral military cooperation weakened. The Baltic States chose diverging paths for developing their defence capabilities, though they firmly grounded their defence systems in NATO's collective defence. For the past twenty years, no notable new joint project has been launched to match the ambitions of BALTBAT, BALTRON, BALTNET or BALTDEFCOL. While the Baltic collaborative spirit and idealism would invite similar aspirations, realities have changed, so too should the perspective on Baltic military cooperation.

The Baltic pre-NATO accession cooperation thrived only with the support of the Western partners. These partners are now NATO Allies, so their relationships with the Baltic States have changed. Therefore, Baltic defence should be primarily addressed

in the NATO context, particularly with the eFP framework nations and the United States. First and foremost, it is necessary to embed stronger Allied armed forces in the Baltic States as much as possible rather than devoting resources to integrating the Baltic's limited capabilities. Previous precedents attest that even the best ideas encounter inter-Baltic competition, different perspectives and priorities, and concerns over sovereignty.

This does not mean there is no role for further Baltic trilateral military cooperation. The Baltic States are a single operational theatre. They will either thrive or fail collectively and must collaborate politically and strategically. The mechanisms are in place and should be used where there is an evident benefit to be gained. Promising areas in military cooperation are:

- Joint procurements or at least further synchronisation of some elements, such as air and missile defence systems and artillery munitions;
- Better Baltic C2 coordination within the NATO context, particularly regarding reinforcement plans;
- Coordination and development of future defence systems such as unmanned aerial, sea and land vehicles and expanded drone (swarm) technology.

Some areas may not fall obviously within the realm of military cooperation but have a major impact on defence. Their aim is to improve resilience and mutual support:

- A common approach and mutual support against hybrid attacks;
- Improved Baltic shared situational awareness;
- The simplification of military mobility, especially prior to hostilities;
- The protection and military defence of undersea and land-based energy infrastructure;
- The safeguarding and redundancy of communication links within, to and from the Baltic States.

While Russia may not be able and willing to pose a direct military threat to the Baltic States in the short term, such a threat must be acknowledged and planned for. Much valuable work has already been done, and more is in progress. Therefore, the military maxim according to which the Baltic States should work is to hope for the best but prepare for the worst. *Si vis pacem, para bellum!* [110]

Notes

[110] If you want peace, prepare for war.

Authors' Information

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